

Resourcing Ministerial Formation, General Synod July 2022: Reflections for EGGS from Ian Paul

Strategy and policy for pre-ordination training ('initial theological education') has been in various states of disarray for many, many years. The General Ordination Exam was a standardised way of assessing readiness for ordination, but it was compromised by the growing diversity of approaches to ordination training, not least in the newly developed diocesan courses.

In 1982, ACCM Occasional Paper 22 proposed that, rather than working to a fixed programme, training institutions should articulate their own understanding of what ordained ministry was about, what ordination training therefore required, and how they were going to deliver it. Although this allowed for greater flexibility and creativity, it was based on a kind of second-guessing of what was wanted by the Church overall, and led to increasing diversity not only of approaches to training but also to actual content, so that those who were ordained could, in principle, have covered little in common. This also led to basic divergence on what the focus should be in training, (Scripture? Theology? History? Practice?) as well as how it is best delivered.

Lincoln and Hind

There were then various attempts to reform and streamline provision, with little real success. A review by the Bishop of Lincoln led to the closure of the Lincoln course, as well as Chichester Theological College, and it was proposed to also close Oakhill—leading to an outcry so that the plan was not fully implemented. The chaos led to the Hind Report of 2003, chaired by John Hind who had been Principal of Chichester when it was closed. A central national provision was proposed, but probably knowing it would be rejected; the requirement for mandatory higher degrees in curacy was also rejected; but the central plank of Hind, that there should be no central control, so that training effectively became a market, was accepted. John Hind was determined that there should never again be central decisions made to close colleges—which are, after all, all independent institutions, both financially and in terms of governance.

The closure of St John's, Nottingham, which was ideally placed geographically, and had for some years been the largest residential college, was in part a symptom of this. Without a national plan or strategy, it failed on the basis of market forces and poor leadership, and the RME changes were the final nail in its coffin.

'Resourcing Ministerial Education' (RME) and Common Awards

The next major review came with 'Resourcing Ministerial Education' (RME) led by Steven Croft in 2015. It was felt that there was too much complexity in the negotiation of training paths between Ministry Division, the TEs, and the dioceses. But many suspected that there was a hidden agenda around episcopal control. The main proposal was that, instead of the central funding following an ordinand to his or her place of training, funds would be allocated to the diocese, who would then control the cost and place of training. A diocese could be given funding for full-time training for an ordinand, but then send the ordinand on a cheaper local course, and keep the difference, though this still had to be used for approved training.

Many of us warned at the time that this would lead to the accumulation of funds in dioceses, the undermining of residential training, and the growth of cheaper methods of training as bishops and dioceses decided to hold on to money and develop their own local methods of training. In addition, it was warned that the allocation of money for different training paths based on age would disadvantage women, who on average enter training later than men. Croft brushed off all these concerns, and played off Archbishops' Council against Synod, telling each that the other would deal with any concerns.

The predicted consequences followed exactly as forecast—and the problem with funds is explicitly mentioned in the current paper for this Synod. Small diocesan courses proliferated; the numbers training on diocesan courses exploded; the largest residential college, St John's, closed; and there was a massive shift to context-based training. There are some very good pedagogical arguments for

context-based training—but the rapid shift to this form of training was primarily driven by diocesan financial decisions, and issues around relocation, rather than by reflection on training effectiveness or national strategy. And, historically, it is TEIs offering residential training which have been the focus of evangelical theology and influence in the Church.

Around the same time, Croft inherited the desire to move to a single university validation arrangement to replace the existing 32 (!) agreements between TEIs and universities, another fruit of the Hind agenda for local innovation. The move to validation by Durham under 'Common Awards' offered the possibility of reduced admissions administration, reduced academic administration, and the hope of a common syllabus or at least framework for training—but it delivered none of these. TEIs refused to agree to a common syllabus, largely because each tradition was anxious that another tradition would be foisted on them. So most of the Durham modules continue to be 'shell' modules, not specifying actual content. Thus different TEIs can teach the same Durham module, but have zero content in common. There is also a vast range of modules so that the diversity of training has continued unabated.

In order to include context-based training, and in particular St Mellitus, into common awards, what had been a part-time course was now granted full-time status by drastically cutting the required classroom learning, an issue that remains undiscussed and unresolved. It is one of many things contributing to a significantly lower content of scripture and theology in pre-ordination training.

RMF and the current paper

It was promised that RME would be reviewed in three years, but Covid delayed that. Moreover, there was a review under the title Reviewing Ministerial Formation—but once again, key parties were played off against one another, and there was such a lack of accountability and transparency that Archbishops' Council initiated an audit review of the failure of communication. All this illustrates the substantial vested interests at play in every discussion of ordination training.

The present paper is an improvement on the previous attempt, and does seek to address some of the issues created by RME. In particular creating stability for TEIs is vital, and great to see addressed. But the paper continues to avoid some of the central issues in training.

- The language of 'direction of travel' (4) is always problematic, as it has in the past been used to smuggle in hidden agendas.
- The rationale for a national strategy for ordination training is that clergy are a national resource, training for a nationally agreed ministry and (in principle) nationally deployable. None of that is true of lay church-based ministry, so why include it in this discussion?
- What is the reason for continuing without a common syllabus for training, and why is that not being addressed?
- How can we have (in effect) full- and part-time teaching on different pathways which leads to the same academic award? If 'curacy'-type training is pulled into the pre-ordination phase for some pathways, why is not taught material then pushed into curacy for those pathways?
- Will the choice of training now be based on ordinands' training needs within a national framework, rather than be determined by individual diocesan agendas as is currently the case?
- Why is 'reducing carbon emissions' presented as a central element of pre-ordination training? Where is there expressed the concern for the continuing loss of biblical and theological literacy in the Church and amongst clergy?

Sean Doherty, Principal of Trinity College, Bristol, adds: We should not take lightly or for granted the national church's commitment to funding tuition for all ordinands and maintenance for those eligible. This helps to attract evangelical candidates for ministry.

RMF is an important development which could bring greater financial stability for TEIs and seeks to correct some of the issues with RME, especially the building up of surpluses of block grant by some

dioceses. (Predicted by several EGGs members when RME was introduced but these concerns were not heeded!) I therefore welcome the clawing back of these surpluses and the move back to central payments.

The strength of RME was closer collaboration between dioceses and TEIs in working out what pathways best suit the candidates. I agree there needs to be a degree of flexibility as to training pathways, provided we avoid a race to the bottom (e.g. recent candidate for three years part-time training was offered two years elsewhere which meant I felt obliged to match this). We also welcome the multi-year block grant proposal to give TEIs greater predictability and ability to plan.

The main concern is that whilst the general direction of travel is very positive, more detail will be needed before TEI concerns can be assuaged – hence see proposed amendment below. For example, there is very little information about maintenance funding at present. It would not be good governance for Synod to agree something in principle without seeing actual proposals.

Likewise, the proposal to have Service Level Agreements between TEIs and the national church is in principle not a bad idea but we will need to ensure there is no compromise introduced to the freedom TEIs currently have to embody the theological convictions of their traditions. We are happy for there to be appropriate national scrutiny via annual monitoring and assurance processes, but what will these actually be and what will they scrutinize?

Again, it is a good idea in principle for funding to go towards innovation and diversity but not at the expense of reducing or capping payments for core training costs which ensure candidates have a grounding in Scripture and theology. It is important to remember that it costs TEIs more to train ordinands than we receive in fees. Likewise, although it would be excellent to provide greater central funding for lay training, assuming there is not additional funding being added to vote 1 then this will need to come from the money that currently pays for ordination training.

Implementation by Autumn 2023 seems extremely ambitious given there will need to be time for consultation and transition.

I am going to table two amendments:

The Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich to move:

30 'That this Synod:

(a) affirm the aims of the "Resourcing Ministerial Formation" in seeking to create a more sustainable and responsive accountable framework for ministerial formation within the calling of the whole people of God;

(b) welcome the principles of reform set out in GS 2271; and

(c) request that synod be invited to consider and agree proposals prior to their implementation.'

(d) request that Ministry Council consider allocation of further interim funding, within the overall Vote 1 budget envelope, should implementation not be ready by autumn 2023

The change to (c) is an attempt to avoid what happened with RME, whereby a report back to Synod was agreed before implementation but this came only in the form of a GSMisc document rather than an engagement with substance. The RMF working groups are underway but unamended this clause would give them a blank cheque when they have not even published their proposals yet!

The proposed addition of (d) is based on a concern that RMF might not be ready for an autumn 2023 implementation. There is a lot of important detail to work out first.

I would very much like to encourage EGGs members to support the amendments and even speak in support of them. A key point for EGGs members should be that we will want reassurance that the proposed SLAs do not force TEIs to compromise or dilute their particular theological convictions and traditions.